

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA**

Cathy Szuter,	:	Civil Action
	:	
Plaintiff	:	No.
	:	
v.	:	
	:	Jury Trial Demanded
Lenox Corporation,	:	
	:	
Defendants	:	

COMPLAINT

Introduction

Plaintiff Cathy Szuter (“Ms. Szuter”), by her undersigned counsel, brings this action pursuant to the law cited herein against Defendant Lenox Corporation (“Lenox”) seeking relief from unlawful employment discrimination.

Jurisdiction And Venue

1. This Court has original jurisdiction to hear this action and adjudicate Ms. Szuter’s Age Discrimination in Employment Act, 29 U.S.C. § 621 *et seq.* (“ADEA”) claim. This Court has supplemental jurisdiction over Ms. Szuter’s Pennsylvania Human Relations Act (“PHRA”) claim.

2. All jurisdictional prerequisites to bringing this action have been satisfied because:

(a) On September 15, 2020, Ms. Szuter dual-filed a timely complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (“EEOC”) and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (“PHRC”); and

(b) On January 28, 2020, the EEOC issued a Dismissal and Notice of Rights to Ms. Szuter.

3. Venue is appropriate in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania because Lenox does business and may be served with process therein.

The Parties

4. Ms. Szuter is fifty-five (55) years old.
5. Ms. Szuter is a citizen and resident of the United States. Ms. Szuter resides in Hamilton Township, New Jersey.
6. Lenox is a Delaware corporation with its corporate headquarters located at 1414 Radcliffe Street, Bristol, PA 19007.
7. Lenox employs approximately six hundred (600) employees.
8. Lenox is an employer as defined in the ADEA and the PHRA.

Factual Background

Ms. Szuter's Employment with Lenox

9. Lenox is an American manufacturing company that sells tableware, giftware, and collectible products under the Lenox, kate spade, Dansk, and Reed & Barton brands.
10. In 1994, Ms. Szuter began working for Lenox as a Production Artist, Lenox China on the Design Team.
11. At all times, Ms. Szuter worked at Lenox's corporate office.
12. During Ms. Szuter's employment with Lenox, Lenox promoted Ms. Szuter several times:
 - (a) In 1997, Lenox promoted Ms. Szuter to Design Production Specialist, Lenox China.
 - (b) In 1998, Lenox promoted Ms. Szuter to Design Production Supervisor, Lenox China.
 - (c) In 1999, Lenox promoted Ms. Szuter to Manager of Design Production, Lenox China.

(d) In 2007, Lenox promoted Ms. Szuter to Manager of New Product Planning, Lenox Corporation.

(e) In 2012, Lenox promoted Ms. Szuter to Director of Design Administration – Metals & Custom Brands.

13. In 2019, Lenox changed Ms. Szuter's position to Design Director, Barware, Flatware & Kitchen, which position Ms. Szuter held until Lenox terminated her employment on March 26, 2020.

14. At all times, Ms. Szuter was qualified for the Design Director, Barware, Flatware & Kitchen position based on her work experience, which includes twenty-five (25) years of Concept development, Art creation, Design direction, Specification and manufacturing expertise, and because she either met or exceeded Lenox's legitimate performance expectations for the position.

Lenox Hires Mads Ryder as CEO;
Mr. Ryder Begins to Rid Lenox of Older Workers

15. In November 2018, Mads Ryder became Lenox's Chief Executive Officer ("CEO").

16. At this time, the Design Team was made up of:

Name	Title	Approximate Age
Tim Carder	VP Design (reporting to Mr. Ryder)	68-72
Troy Bell	Director of 2-d dinnerware (reporting to Mr. Carder)	55-56
Henry Van der Turyn	Specifications Director (reporting to Mr. Carder)	64
Eric Plebani	CAD Manager (reporting to Mr. Carder)	42
Fawn Ostriak	VP Dinnerware and Concept design (reporting to Mr. Carder)	45-50
Cathy Szuter	Director of Design Administration – Metals & Custom Brands (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	53
Jennifer Kehl	Ceramic and glass Giftware (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	49
Jane Robinson	Design Director (reporting to Tim Carder / Jackie Gordon)	58-63

Jessica Zultewicz	Design Manager (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	32
Fawn Brokaw	Designer (reporting to Ms. Szuter)	31
Tanya Good	Design Specifications (reporting to Ms. Kehl)	47
Bonnie Porter	Senior Designer (reporting to Ms. Robinson)	49-50
Christina Pena	Designer (reporting to Ms. Kehl)	35

17. After becoming Lenox's CEO, Mr. Ryder made several age-related comments regarding older workers, which suggest that Mr. Ryder wanted to move Lenox's older workers out and replace them with younger workers. For example:

- (a) In 2018, within the first six (6) months of becoming Lenox's CEO, Mr. Ryder stated that if it was up to him, he would be in a room full of young people with young, fresh ideas.
- (b) In 2018, within the first six (6) months of becoming Lenox's CEO, Mr. Ryder stated, "I want young people."
- (c) On January 11, 2019, Mr. Ryder gave an interview in which he was asked, "Twenty years ago, I was having the same conversation with the tabletop industry. It was about the casualization of America, the death of the china cabinet. What are you doing to understand who that consumer is today?" Mr. Ryder answered, "If you look around our industry, those people you talked to 20 years ago are probably still working in the companies. Consumers today are totally different. We don't understand them [in part] because we don't have some of those consumers as our employees, or not enough of them." [Exhibit P-1].
- (d) On January 24, 2019, Ms. Szuter was replaced on a concept development trip to Europe by her direct report, Fawn Brokaw (approximate age 31). Ms. Szuter was really surprised and concerned by this since the concept development trip would normally

be part of her job function. Ms. Szuter asked Tim Carder (VP Design) why this decision was made and was told that Mr. Ryder wanted young people to travel.

(e) In January/February 2019, a senior manager told Ms. Szuter that Mr. Ryder wanted the age group he was trying to attract to design and develop the products, not the older designers.

(f) In an interview published on October 19, 2020, Mr. Ryder indicated that a goal with Lenox's restructuring was to get "fresh hires" in and suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic gave Lenox this opportunity. [Exhibit P-2].

18. In January 2019, Lenox terminated Michelle Barbone (Chief Marketing Officer), who was approximately age 55-60.

19. In February 2019, Lenox forced Tim Riddle, President of the Reed & Barton brand, who was approximately age 58-65, to resign.

20. As CEO, Mr. Ryder began to replace older workers with younger, inexperienced workers and pushed older workers into other areas of the company.

21. In February 2019, Mr. Ryder re-organized the Design Team as follows:

Name	Title	Approximate Age
Tim Carder	VP Design (reporting to Mr. Ryder)	68-72
Fawn Ostriak	VP Dinnerware, Concept (reporting to Mr. Carder)	45-50
Jennifer Kehl	R&B gifts, Giftware, Seasonal (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	49
Cathy Szuter	Barware, Flatware, Kitchen (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	53
Troy Bell	Director of 2-d Dinnerware (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	55-56
Tanya Good	Specifications Manager, Giftware and Seasonal (reporting to Ms. Kehl)	48
Amanda McGee	Giftware and Home Décor Designer (reporting to Ms. Kehl)	30
Bonnie Porter	Senior Designer of Giftware, Ornaments, and Home Decor (reporting to Ms. Kehl)	49-50
Jessica Zultewicz	Design Manager	32

22. At this time, Lenox terminated Henry Van der Turyn (approximate age 64) and Jane Robinson (approximate age 58-63).

23. In November 2019, Lenox again re-organized the Design Team as follows:

Name	Title	Approximate Age
Fawn Ostriak	CCO Innovation (Chief Creative Officer) (reporting to Mr. Ryder)	45-50
Deanna Black	Designer (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	25
Tim Carder	Now referred to as "Dr. Clay" (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	68-72
Geri Anne Noe	Studio Director (reporting to Ms. Ostriak) Notably, Ms. Noe had <u>no</u> prior design experience.	47
Jennifer Kehl	Concept Director, Gifts, Seasonal (reporting to Ms. Noe)	49
Jessica Zultewicz	Dinnerware Director (reporting to Ms. Noe)	32
Cathy Szuter	Concept Director, Barware, Flatware, Kitchen (reporting to Ms. Noe)	54
Troy Bell	Director of 2-d dinnerware (reporting to Ms. Zultewicz)	55-56
Tanya Good	Specifications Manager, Giftware and Seasonal (reporting to Ms. Kehl)	48
Amanda McGee	Giftware and Home Décor Designer (reporting to Ms. Kehl)	30
Bonnie Porter	Senior Designer of Giftware, Ornaments, and Home Decor (reporting to Ms. Kehl)	49-50

Lenox Terminates Ms. Szuter's Employment and Retains Younger Workers

24. On March 26, 2020, Lenox terminated Ms. Szuter's employment. Lenox claims that Ms. Szuter was part of a reduction in force.

25. As of March 26, 2020, Ms. Szuter was fifty-four (54) years old.

26. Also on March 26, 2020, Lenox terminated approximately 30-35 employees at the Bristol, PA corporate office. Of these employees, twenty-five (25) were over age fifty (50) and two (2) were over age forty (40).

27. After March 26, 2020, Lenox's Design Team was made up of:

Name	Title	Approximate Age
Fawn Ostriak	COO innovation (reporting to Mr. Ryder)	45-50
Deanna Black	Innovation Designer (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	25
Geri Anne Noe	Studio Director (reporting to Ms. Ostriak) (furloughed)	47
Jennifer Kehl	Concept Director, Gifts, Seasonal (reporting to Ms. Noe)	49
Bonnie Porter	Senior Designer of Giftware, Ornaments, and Home Decor (reporting to Ms. Kehl) (furloughed – then terminated)	49-50
Jessica Zultewicz	Dinnerware Director (reporting to Ms. Noe)	32
Troy Bell	Director of 2-d dinnerware (reporting to Ms. Zultewicz)	55-56
Eric Plebani	CAD Manager (furloughed)	42

28. During summer 2020, Lenox furloughed some of its employees at the Bristol, PA headquarters.

Lenox Re-hires Workers; Ms. Szuter Asks Lenox to Re-hire Her

29. Recently, Lenox re-hired several workers.

30. Upon information and belief, as of today, Lenox's Design Team is made up of:

Name	Title	Approximate Age
Fawn Ostriak	CCO (reporting to Mr. Ryder)	45-50
Deanna Black	Designer (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	25
Jennifer Kehl	Director (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	49
Jessica Zultewicz	Director (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	32
Troy Bell	Director (reporting to Ms. Zultewicz)	55-56
Eric Plebani	CAD Manager (reporting to Ms. Ostriak)	42

31. On May 24, 2020, Ms. Szuter reached out to Ms. Ostriak to see if Lenox would re-hire her.

32. On September 2, 2020, Ms. Szuter again reached out to Ms. Ostriak to see if Lenox would re-hire her.

33. Ms. Ostriak did not respond to Ms. Szuter's September 2, 2020 email.

Count I
Violation of the ADEA – Age Discrimination

34. Ms. Szuter incorporates by reference paragraphs 1 through 33 as though the same were set forth at length herein.

35. As averred above, at all times, Ms. Szuter was qualified for the Design Director, Barware, Flatware & Kitchen position based on her work experience, which includes twenty-five (25) of Concept development, Art creation, Design direction, Specification and manufacturing expertise, and because she either met or exceeded Lenox's legitimate performance expectations for the position.

36. As averred above, on March 26, 2020, Lenox terminated Ms. Szuter's employment.

37. As averred above, as of March 26, 2020, Ms. Szuter was fifty-four (54) years old.

38. As averred above, Lenox retained younger workers.

39. As averred above, after becoming Lenox's CEO, Mr. Ryder made several age-related comments regarding older workers, which suggest that Mr. Ryder wanted to move Lenox's older workers out and replace them with younger workers.

40. Lenox terminated Ms. Szuter's employment because of her age.

41. Lenox knowingly and willfully discriminated against Ms. Szuter on the basis of her age in violation of the ADEA.

42. As a result of Lenox's unlawful discrimination, Ms. Szuter is entitled to all legal and equitable remedies available under the ADEA.

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff Cathy Szuter respectfully requests this Court to:

(a) Issue a Declaratory Judgment declaring that the discriminatory practices set forth herein are unlawful and in violation of the ADEA;

(b) Issue preliminary and permanent injunctions enjoining and restraining Defendant, its successors, officers, agents and employees and those acting in participation with Defendant from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination or retaliation against Plaintiff in violation of the ADEA and ordering Defendant to re-hire Plaintiff upon such terms and conditions as will put Plaintiff to the position Plaintiff would have occupied had Defendant not unlawfully discriminated against Plaintiff.

(c) Enter judgment in favor of Plaintiff, and against Defendant, for back pay in the amount of wages and fringe benefits in an amount of the financial loss determined to have been sustained by Plaintiff.

(d) Enter judgment in favor of Plaintiff for front pay in lieu of hiring.

(e) Enter judgment in favor of Plaintiff for liquidated damages to the extent allowable by law for the willful violation of the ADEA.

(f) Enter judgment in favor of Plaintiff for any other monetary losses as a direct result of Defendant's violation of the ADEA.

(g) Issue such orders and further relief as may be necessary and appropriate in order to redress the deprivation of rights and privileges sustained by Plaintiff.

(h) Award Plaintiff's reasonable attorneys' fees together with the costs of this action.

Count II
Violation of the PHRA – Age Discrimination

43. Ms. Szuter incorporates by reference paragraphs 1 through 42 as though the same were set forth at length herein.

44. As averred above, at all times, Ms. Szuter was qualified for the Design Director, Barware, Flatware & Kitchen position based on her work experience, which includes twenty-five (25) of Concept development, Art creation, Design direction, Specification and manufacturing

expertise, and because she either met or exceeded Lenox's legitimate performance expectations for the position.

45. As averred above, on March 26, 2020, Lenox terminated Ms. Szuter's employment.

46. As averred above, as of March 26, 2020, Ms. Szuter was fifty-four (54) years old.

47. As averred above, Lenox retained younger workers.

48. As averred above, after becoming Lenox's CEO, Mr. Ryder made several age-related comments regarding older workers, which suggest that Mr. Ryder wanted to move Lenox's older workers out and replace them with younger workers.

49. Lenox terminated Ms. Szuter's employment because of her age.

50. Lenox knowingly and willfully discriminated against Ms. Szuter on the basis of her age in violation of the PHRA.

51. As a result of Lenox's unlawful discrimination, Ms. Szuter is entitled to all legal and equitable remedies available under the PHRA.

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff Cathy Szuter respectfully requests this Court to:

- (a) Issue a Declaratory Judgment declaring that the discriminatory practices set forth herein are unlawful and in violation of the PHRA;
- (b) Issue preliminary and permanent injunctions enjoining and restraining Defendant, its successors, officers, agents and employees and those acting in participation with Defendant from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination or retaliation against Plaintiff in violation of the PHRA and ordering Defendant to re-hire Plaintiff upon such terms and conditions as will return Plaintiff to the position Plaintiff would have occupied had Defendant not unlawfully discriminated against Plaintiff.

- (c) Enter judgment in favor of Plaintiff, and against Defendant, for back pay in the amount of wages and fringe benefits in an amount of the financial loss determined to have been sustained by Plaintiff.
- (d) Enter judgment in favor of Plaintiff for front pay in lieu of hiring.
- (e) Enter judgment in favor of Plaintiff for compensatory damages to the extent allowable by law under the PHRA.
- (f) Enter judgment in favor of Plaintiff for any other monetary losses as a direct result of Defendant's violation of the PHRA.
- (g) Issue such orders and further relief as may be necessary and appropriate in order to redress the deprivation of rights and privileges sustained by Plaintiff.
- (h) Award Plaintiff's reasonable attorneys' fees together with the costs of this action.

Jury Demand

Plaintiff hereby demands a jury to try all claims triable by jury.

Dated: April 9, 2021



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Attorney for Plaintiff

Exhibit P-1

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ABOUT PSFK

Lenox's New CEO Is Plotting To Get The Dinnerware Brand Out Of Its Time Warp—And Woo Millennial Shoppers

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Written By:
Barbara Thau

CEO Mads Ryder says the tabletop brand is ‘living in the past’—Here, the former LEGO executive discusses the cultural makeover he’s spearheading to usher the brand into the 21st century

Mads Ryder, the new CEO of [Lenox](#), is unapologetic about the 130-year old brand. It’s out of touch, “uncool” and anachronistically chasing a china-cabinet owning consumer base that’s been fading for decades.

A cultural makeover is now afoot at the dinnerware brand spearheaded by Ryder, who joined Lenox in November 2018 following executive posts at firms ranging from Lego to Weight Watchers and Royal Copenhagen. He is enmeshed in a corporate soul-searching mission that starts with unearthing a nuanced, psychographic feel for the wants and needs of today’s modern—and younger—consumer, insight that has long eluded the company.

Ryder spoke with PSFK on Lenox's revival strategy thus far, a central piece of which is signing on consulting firms with very 21st-century clients like Google and Facebook for strategic guidance, and on how the company can leverage its own legacy and stable of brands like Lenox, Dansk and Kate Spade, to become newly relevant to how Americans eat, entertain and live today.



What appealed to you about the Lenox brand?

The legacy of the brand, the history. What also appeals to me is that the traditional big players in the fine dinnerware section of the retail/online industry are still living in the past, and are not understanding how consumers [today] behave and why they behave the way they do.

We are still [catering mostly] to consumers that are not going to be here several years ahead.

Who is the consumer that Lenox does not understand?

If I could answer your question, then I would be a billionaire right now. I think we all are trying to find our new consumers. It's the casual young people who simply eat and dine differently. They entertain people differently, and they live differently.

They still like nice products and they still want to pay for quality. They have a much more relaxed lifestyle, different taste, and they want to have something that works both for the casual lifestyle but also some dinnerware that can be slightly upgraded to be more formal, but more individual, when they have guests coming over.

Twenty years ago, I was having the same conversation with the tabletop industry. It was about the casualization of America, the death of the china cabinet. What are you doing to understand who that consumer is today?

If you look around our industry, those people you talked to 20 years ago are probably still working in the companies. Consumers today are totally different. We don't understand them [in part] because we don't have some of those consumers as our employees, or not enough of them.

We are spending quite some money and a lot of resources to find those consumers. We're investing in research with some of the best research companies in the world to actively spend time with consumers. They do research for Facebook, Google, Ford, Chanel, Samsung, because that's where the new consumers are with these brands. Also, to map out how they behave online, we are putting a lot of resources into our digital efforts.

Is this a first for Lenox? Does it mark a cultural shift?

Chat With A Human

Yes. Big time. We do not expect to get all consumers in the world. All of them sit around the table and eat their food at a point in time. No one is eating from the floor. It is getting that subset of consumers that will be the Lenox consumer in the future.

Who are your current consumers?

First of all, we love our current consumers. We would love to stay with them. Our current consumer is the more traditional fine dinnerware, or seasonal dinnerware, consumer that has been loyal to our brand for years. They can be between 35 and 85. They also might be the daughters and the sons who come from the homes of Lenox customers.

We're just saying that there are a lot of new consumers out there with new behavior that we haven't been grasping, and none of our competitors have been grasping, for years.



What are you discovering so far?

We know that with the young consumers, it can be quality, but it needs to be multifunctional. It needs to be functional for daily use and for occasions as well. We know that it needs to be microwave safe, dishwasher safe, that's a must.

We also know that collectability is [appealing to twentysomethings.] When you are marrying some years later, then you continue to collect and you might upgrade what you have in your collection because you have more spending power.

There needs to be a reason to buy into our dinnerware. I would like us to be able to develop products where young people would go home to their grandma and say, 'Can I have those pieces from your old dinnerware set? I don't need all of it, but I need a few pieces because they would fit so great with what I just bought yesterday at Macy's.'

If we could do that, if we could reactivate everything we have done for the last 130 years by introducing something new that fits into the millions and millions and millions of dinner plates we have produced, I would be so happy.

You've identified an opportunity to address the way Americans eat, entertain and celebrate at home. How does that translate into how Lenox will merchandise to consumers at retail?

It needs to be something that can be casual, though nice, if necessary. You can buy a plain white Tshirt, and you can wear it together with a pair of jogging pants. But if you buy some nice jeans, highheeled shoes, put the white Tshirt on and a very nice scarf, that Tshirt suddenly looks like a million bucks. It's really enhancing the whole look.

That's the way we want to do dinnerware. It has to be something that can stand alone, like your bowl of yogurt in the morning, but that can also go on the table when you invite neighbors over and be quite a nice component in a nicely set table.

We need to inspire consumers on how you can prepare a table or prepare a table for neighbors coming over. I don't want to talk down to consumers by saying, 'educate them.' I would like to say, 'inform them,' because what we know from consumers nowadays is that they look for and they seek information like crazy.

I don't think consumers care about whether it's porcelain bone china, fine bone china, or whatever we design it to be. I think they care about, 'how do I use it?' The jacket that you have on right now, do you know exactly whether it's wool, whether it's silk? I don't know if you do, but you know whether you need to dry clean it, you know what it goes together with.

We haven't equipped our consumers with the same kind of knowledge about the dos and don'ts when preparing a table, and [asking them], 'what is your style?'

What will Lenox's digital repositioning entail?

We don't see the digital consumer who's spent time online, who buys and shops and informs themselves in the digital world. They don't see us, because we don't get to them. What we are doing other than research, is that we are going to have a digital mindset be the pivotal point of the repositioning of Lenox.

What are the product designs and retail-merchandising tactics that are missing in Lenox's strategy?

We present and promote our products in a very artificial way. You never do a table with six plates, a salad plate, several spoons and several forks. It looks like a dressed-up setup, instead of just showing how a table looks in a normal home.

What are the social, food and entertaining trend opportunities for the brand?

The need to be yourself, the need to be an individual. The same goes for a dinner table or the way to decorate your house. You want to have your own identity. This is our family. This is our house. This is the way we live. I think one of the trends is, I want to be Barbara, and I want to be Mads. This is the way I live, take it or leave it.

You might even have something you wear that's your signature thing. It can be a scarf, a piece of jewelry; it can be that you always wear green. It's the same in my house. This is the house where we have the most comfy chairs and the most comfy furniture, or we are the house of millions of candlelights. In my house, this is the way we prepare the table. It's finding that identity.

There's a trend of allowing people and equipping them to be individuals, [while giving them] the dos and the don'ts. [In beauty], you learn it when you're a 16 year old girl and you go to a makeup artist in Macy's. You get to know the colors for you, and how you put the makeup on based on input and advice, they you get [sophisticated] over time.

Shoppers of home products and tabletop are knowledgeable like never before via the endless aisle of choice online and by getting their décor inspiration from sites like Pinterest to Houzz. How will this inform your brand mix and designer partnerships?

Once we get the results of our research, we will [devise] ways to execute this. We have been working together with a lot of designers and had success.

What we want to do in the future is collaborations that will enhance the storytelling of 130 years in the industry, and understanding the craft of dinnerware. Consumers like stories. They want to pay full price if there's a reason for that. If you can tell the story behind the Louis Vuitton bag and the hours and hours it takes to make it, people want to pay for that.

What imprint from your work with leading brands like Lego, Weight Watchers and Royal Copenhagen will make its mark at Lenox?

What we would like to do is something like we did at Royal Copenhagen, which started before I joined. We were successful in creating products that were mixed and matched with old products. We activated a 240-year-old collection, so you could literally take something that was produced in 1790, and mix it with [something ne]



How is Lenox's retail distribution changing, and what are growth opportunities channel-wise?

We see a big shift right now, obviously, from brick and mortar to online. We have some big customers, the Macy's, the Bed Bath & Beyonds, the Amazons of the world, where we mostly have to follow [their growth online.] Online is a bigger portion of Lenox's business than [brick-and-mortar] retail right now. Online is growing like crazy, but there will be a balance that we can get to at some point in time.

What is the sales picture for Lenox? What are the performance goals that you're looking to reach?

We are doing OK, but where we are struggling is on the discounts. There's a discount war going on out there—the promotions online, the discounting, which a lot of our retail customers do, then you also give coupons in stores. It's a race towards the bottom. Then, unfortunately, our retail customers are suffering big time because of that race. Our customers are discounting to get to consumers. I don't think it is in anyone's interest, because I think we're diluting what we're doing.

What do you see as a way to counter that for Lenox?

We have an interest in our [retail] customers being profitable. We can do that by developing fantastic products where we can justify a premium price. The way we justify that premium price is actually what we talked about before, add value, add storytelling, add quality and add reasons for choosing our products and not a commodity product.

What's your niche in the U.S. tabletop market and how is it distinct from your competitors'?

This year we'll be 130 years old. Not a lot of American companies can claim that they have 130-year history. Not a lot of American companies can say that they came out of a founder [Walter Scott Lenox] who actually believed in being able to mix sand and water and put it into an oven and then work with glazing, a guy who was, over and over again, turned down by everyone then finally had a breakthrough, and ended up being successful.

Not a lot of companies started that way in the U.S. and are still here. We have something that appeals to the American life, American history and also, to the way Americans look at themselves. There's a good story in that.

Something that will never, never die is quality. If we can spin the Lenox story around how what we do now [aligns] with what we have done for 130 years, I think we have something that very few of our competitors, if any, have.

How might we be surprised by how Lenox tells a story at retail a year from now? Take us into a retail store.

It is a good question because when you look at a retail [tabletop] floor, there's not a lot of staff anymore; there's not a lot of opportunity to tell the story. I think the story would be told online. That goes back to why we are investing now in a strengthened digital setup and a digital mindset. Because I think, unfortunately, we need to tell our story ourselves on Lenox.com. It means curating our website to that new consumer, and making it exciting based on what we learn from our research studies of the new consumer.

Go to any other consumer-focused brands' website and see how they do it. It's done with stories, by videos, by testimonials and by a lot of other components.

How do you envision Lenox five years from now versus today?

It's a brand a young consumer would want to buy, and if you ask them about it, they would say, 'Wow, a lot of cool things are going on at Lenox.' They will say that without scaring away our loyal consumers and without being scared away by our loyal consumers.

Lenox

For more about how legacy brands like Lenox are continuing to evolve with changing demands and consumer lifestyles, see PSFK's [reports](#) and [newsletters](#).



LATEST OBSERVATIONS & ANALYSIS

Here are the most popular stories that retailers and brands are reading right now to inspire them with their CX innovation work.



Chat With A Human

Exhibit P-2



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By [Fred Nicolaus](#)

Lenox, the 130-year-old tableware company, has been purchased by private equity firm Centre Lane Partners. The sale includes Lenox's core brand as well as [Dansk](#) and [Reed & Barton](#).

"We are delighted to join the Centre Lane Partners family," said CEO **Mads Ryder** in a statement. "We have spent the last 18 to 24 months shaping our operational platform for growth. We have invested in branding and strengthened our e-commerce capabilities, and with the support of Centre Lane, we are looking forward to building on the vision that has made Lenox so unique since its founding in 1889."

The move comes amid a tumultuous time for Lenox. In April of this year, the company [permanently closed its factory](#) in Kinston, North Carolina, citing the challenges posed by the [coronavirus](#) pandemic. Then in July, the company announced that it would close all of its outlet and warehouse stores, again pointing to COVID-19.

Ryder, who joined the company in 2018, has been hoping to do for the Philadelphia-based Lenox what he did for Royal Copenhagen in Denmark: Streamline the product selection and make the brand's tabletop assortment [relevant for a younger audience](#). "It's a little bit early [to say], but there's no doubt that the [current] range is very broad; I think we will need to focus it more," he told *BOH* at the time. "But what we really need to do is get to the young consumer—and also activate some of the old stuff, but make it appealing to [a new generation]."

Centre Lane Partners is a New York-based private equity firm that, according to a statement, "invests in the equity and debt of middle market companies in North America." The company has investments in home world consumer brands like flatware maker [Oneida](#), glassware manufacturer Anchor Hocking, and 175-year-old home fragrance company Candle-lite.

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"We are very pleased to be investing in Lenox Corporation," **Mayank Singh**, a Centre Lane managing director involved with the deal, said in a statement. "The company's brands are synonymous with tabletop. Lenox leads the industry in quality, design and innovation, and we look forward to partnering with management to participate in the next phase of Lenox's transformation and growth."

Centre Lane is acquiring Lenox from Clarion Capital Partners, which purchased the company in a bankruptcy auction in 2009.

Below, Ryder shares the thinking behind the move (it had been in the works pre-pandemic) and explains why he's energized by the change in ownership.

You had been pushing for a sale, even before the pandemic—what was the rationale at the time?

To create more freedom for the initiatives we wanted to implement and more flexibility. The market is not easy, and a lot of our big customers have been [struggling]. Around Christmas last year, Bed Bath & Beyond started to restructure, and so did Macy's. We had taken some steps, but we had also lacked the financial muscle to take the next steps. That was the idea behind getting new ownership and fresh hires and fresh capital in.



Mads Ryder/Katia Repina

Then COVID hit.

Unfortunately—or fortunately, you could say, depending on which angle you are looking at—[the pandemic] forced us to take a lot of steps to reduce our company. We closed down our retail stores [because] we had to. We also had to close down our manufacturing in the U.S.

COVID put the whole sales process on hold. And then we got into firefighting mode. And in that firefighting mode, we found a plan and a strategy that we actually were able to sell the company on. [It was] a much better platform than pre-COVID—I would actually say that COVID accelerated a lot of the initiatives that we would have [had] to take.

So you would have looked into closing retail stores and shutting down the factory, COVID or no?

Maybe not the factory, but at least the retail stores, yes.

Were the retail stores just not profitable?

It's [about] profitability, but also complexity. We're in manufacturing *and* retail *and* wholesale *and* e-commerce *and* the catalog business—and the company is not that big! At some point, we simply needed to take complexity out [in order] to reduce costs and be profitable.

With retail out of the picture, what channel do you want to maximize?

We have the perfect platform to grow from now—a platform that can service a wholesale environment that is [now] highly dominated by e-commerce. For example, Macy's is brick and mortar but also e-commerce. We're able to service Amazon and Wayfair, as well. The single most fantastic thing that has happened in the COVID period is [the growth of] our own e-commerce and our ability to drop-ship straight to consumers.

Our own e-commerce has grown dramatically, about 30 percent. We've also seen that we've been able to focus the company to a higher degree on younger consumers—young families, and young households in general. We have seen tremendous growth in the younger target groups, as well as tremendous growth in dinnerware. That's right in the core of what we've tried to do in the last couple of years: Going after young consumers and making sure that we focus more on the core of the business, which is tabletop.

As opposed to more intricate pieces?

[Instead of] home decor and figurines and ornaments.

It's sad to close a factory, and a lot of people loved Kinston. What's the hardest part about giving up manufacturing in the U.S.?

The biggest challenge is actually the communication around it. Less than 10 percent of our sales had been Kinston-manufactured products in the past year. Kinston was doing fine dinnerware and bone china, and we've seen both categories decline dramatically over the last [several] years. We're all going to a more casual world and a more casual lifestyle—casual has grown tremendously the last three years for us—but Kinston specialized in the fine.

Tell me about the new owners. It seems like they have a small roster of home brands. What are their immediate plans?

I don't want to comment too much on their plans yet because I don't know them well enough, but I know that one of the reasons why they bought us was [because] they saw a platform they could grow from.

How are you feeling personally? You moved from Copenhagen to Philadelphia to transform Lenox, and it's been a tumultuous few years. Are you in it for the long haul?

I feel great about it. I don't want to be the Dane coming to the U.S. and closing down a 130-year-old company—that's not the way I'm wired. I want to be the Dane who came over here, helped this company through a tough time, and then get out on another side with the new ownership and show the world that this company, although it's 130 years old, is very vibrant and energetic, and that we can grow. We did it when I was back at Royal Copenhagen in Denmark, and that company was 250 years old, so we can do it here.

I feel this [sale] is the best thing that could ever happen to our company. Now it's up to us to show our new owners that they have made one of the best decisions they could ever make.

Homepage photo: Lenox's Luna nesting dinnerware set | Courtesy of Lenox

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